

Dear Neighbor,

As the Legislature addresses numerous challenges facing our community, state and nation, it is extremely important that all citizens participate in the process.

State government and legislative actions directly affect you, your family, and our community. Whenever you have a concern, an opinion, a question, or an idea, please take time to share it with me.

Your interest and involvement is tremendously valuable. It's very important for me to know what's on your mind. Listening to the people in my district is the only way I can provide the best possible representation for Spokane.

A question I'm hearing often is, "How can I effectively participate in the process?" This pamphlet will help. I've included "Nine Aids to Writing Legislators;" tips on the most effective way to tell me about your issue.

I hope this information is helpful and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,



Brad Benson
State Representative



THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS

The objective of the legislature is to reach agreement on a wide range of issues affecting everyone and the future of Washington state.

We choose representatives to make important judgments about what kind of laws and policies are most reasonable and will best serve our communities.

I receive a great deal of information from a wide variety of sources, including staff, state agencies, and professional lobbyists. **Yet, much of what I actually decide depends on the views, interests, and preferences of you, the citizens who elect me.**

This is how the legislature was designed to work. It's based on a close, open and positive relationship between elected officials and the citizens they represent.

"It is not the fact of liberty, but the way in which liberty is exercised that ultimately determines whether liberty itself survives."

— Dorothy Thompson

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**STATE REPRESENTATIVE
BRAD BENSON**

A CITIZEN'S GUIDE TO EFFECTIVE LEGISLATIVE PARTICIPATION

WHAT YOU CAN DO

You can actively participate in a variety of ways. Select the method that allows the fullest expression of your personal interest and commitment, but follow some basic steps.

Know how the process works

In order for your individual participation to be most effective, a basic understanding of the legislative process is essential.

If you have a question about the process, call my office. I'll be happy to answer your questions.

Make yourself the expert

Before you address an issue, do some homework. Know the whole issue: who it affects, what others feel about it, how it will influence future trends, and any other information you are able to gather. Thorough research allows you to present your viewpoint with confidence and credibility, and combined with your personal experience, is the most effective information you can provide.

Get to know your representatives

To make a difference in the legislative process, you must develop a relationship with your representatives. The best way to get to know your legislators on a personal basis is to spend time with them when the Legislature is not meeting. Arrange a meeting during the months between session when I'm at home.

Personal visit . . .

Call my office, introduce yourself, tell me what you would like to discuss and make an appointment for a visit.

Write a letter . . .

Express your views and/or request my attention through the mail. Write letters personally. Just like at

home, form letters in my legislative mail get little attention and are rarely effective. Include your mailing address and phone number so I know where to respond.

Call the toll-free hotline . . .

The legislature staffs a hotline where you can leave me a message. It'll save a long-distance call when we're in Olympia. The number is 1-800-562-6000.

Email . . .

Email is also a very effective way to communicate with me. My laptop computer enables me to access legislative email from my Olympia office and my home in Spokane.

“There is but one element of government, and that is THE PEOPLE. From this springs all government.”

— John Adams

If you plan a visit, know what you want to say, be factual and make your comments as brief and specific as you can. If there is something you do not know, be willing to admit it and offer to follow up with more information later (also an avenue for further discussion).

Get to know legislative staff

Legislators rely heavily on their professional staff members for information gathering and analysis. You can play an equally supportive role by making sure staff is aware of the perspective your personal knowledge and experience can provide.

Legislative staff members face an incredible amount and variety of issues which they are supposed to understand. They always appreciate new sources of clear and accurate information and they are usually willing to return the favor.

Network with other citizens

Much of the information you need to be effective in the legislative process can be obtained from other concerned and active citizens. Most interest areas are represented by informal citizen groups, if not formal membership organizations.

Find out whether there are groups that share your concerns and establish a network. A group of concerned citizens can be much more effective working together, rather than as separate individuals trying to accomplish the same goal.

KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER

Regardless of how frequently you contact your representatives, you will be far more effective following these points:

- 1 Be well prepared for your discussions.
- 2 Provide a written statement with all verbal presentations.
- 3 Make letters specific and concise.

Whatever position you represent, however, remember your participation makes a difference.

Our legislative process is one way each of us may contribute to the quality of life we experience in our state. Your willingness to be a responsible, involved participant is crucial to the decision-making process.

NINE AIDS TO WRITING LEGISLATORS

- 1 Write on your personal or business letterhead, if possible, and sign your name over your typed signature at the end of the message.
- 2 Be sure your exact return address is on the letter, not just the envelope. Envelopes sometimes get separated from the letter.
- 3 Identify your subject clearly. State the name of the legislation you are writing about. Give the House or Senate bill number if you know it.
- 4 State your reason for writing. Your own personal experience is your best support in evidence. Explain how the issue would affect you, or your family, business or profession, or what affect it could have on your community.
- 5 Avoid stereotyped phrases and sentences that give the appearance of "form" letters. They tend to identify your message as part of an organized pressure campaign and produce little or no impact.
- 6 Be reasonable. Don't ask for the impossible. Don't threaten. Don't say, "I'll never vote for you unless you do such and such." That will not help your cause. It may even harm it.
- 7 Ask your legislator to state his position on the issue in his reply. As a constituent, you are entitled to know.
- 8 Consider the factor of timing. Try to write your position on a bill while it is in committee. Your senators and representatives can usually be more responsive to your appeal at that time rather than later on when the bill has already been approved by committee. Of course, that is not always the case. Sometimes your legislator may reserve judgment and her vote until the sentiment of her constituency has crystallized.
- 9 Thank your legislator if he pleases you with his vote on an issue. Everybody appreciates a complimentary letter and remembers it. On the other hand, if his vote is contrary to your position, don't hesitate to let him know. Your legislator will remember that too.

REPRESENTATIVE BRAD BENSON

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